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Women and Knowledge in Early Christianity: An Introduction

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This book is offered to our esteemed colleague Antti Marjanen, Professor of Gnosticism and Early Christian Literature at the University of Helsinki, on the occasion of his retirement from the Faculty of Theology. In honor of Antti's lifetime of scholarship, we have invited the contributors of this volume to write on women and knowledge in early Christianity, topics that have been central in Antti's research.

The topic of the knowledge possessed by and related to women in the context of early Christianity can be approached from many different perspectives, ranging from questions related to women's education in the ancient world and women's roles as recipients and mediators of (secret or public) knowledge, whether through mythical female characters who claim to impart knowledge about the primordial past of humankind or through portrayals of knowledgeable women in other kinds of stories. Women's knowledge could be practical (pertaining to skills necessary in everyday life), mystical (manifesting in prophecy and ritual), or divine (being essential to the salvation of humankind). Ancient writers talked about real women they knew; they narrated about idealized women, usually those who had lived in the distant past; they used women as rhetorical tools "to think with"; they linked feminine imagery with the divine. Attitudes toward women and their knowledge thus range from eulogies of wise women, as carriers of true wisdom, to complaints about women's lack of understanding. Sometimes, the authority of women in

regard to their knowledge is taken for granted, while at other times such authority is questioned, belittled, or outright rejected.

Idealized Women in Myth and Narrative

Jewish and Christian traditions, which claimed to be monotheistic, depicted the one true God for the most part in masculine terms and images.[1] In contrast, the feminine belonged self-evidently to polytheistic mythology, in particular to the Greco-Roman pantheon, starting with Gaia (Tellus or Terra in Roman mythology), the Mother Earth who nurtured and sustained all life. Powerful goddesses included Demeter in Greece and Ceres in Rome, venerated for having introduced agricultural skills to humankind, Athena and Minerva, goddesses of wisdom, and Isis and Magna Mater, worshipped in some of the most popular cults.[2] Some of their features were even adopted into the emerging Christian cult of Mary, Mother of God, and other female saints.[3]

Nevertheless, the heavenly realm of Jewish and Christian thinking was not altogether devoid of feminine aspects. In Jewish wisdom literature, the term for God's wisdom was feminine in gender, both in Hebrew (חָכְמָה) and Greek (σοφία). In this body of texts, divine

[1] In biblical texts, God is sometimes depicted using attributes and verbs associated with mothers and motherhood; cf. Isa 49:15; 66:13; Matt 23:37 // Luke 13:34.

[2] A classic treatment of the feminine in the ancient world, including goddesses, is Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Dorset, 1975), and, more recently, e.g., Attilio Mastrocinque and Concetta Giuffré Scibona, ed., *Demeter, Isis, Vesta, and Cybele: Studies in Greek and Roman Religion in Honour of Giulia Sfameni Gasparro.* Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 36 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2012).

[3] See Philippe Borgeaud, *Mother of the Gods: From Cybele to the Virgin Mary* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

wisdom is personified and portrayed as the mediator between God and humans (Prov 8; Sir 24). In early Christianity, this mediating role and other traits of Wisdom are given to God's son. In early gospel traditions, for instance, Jesus presents himself as the envoy of Wisdom (Sayings source Q: Matt 11:19 // Luke 7:35; cf. Luke 11:49), Paul identifies the crucified Christ with the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24), and the Gospel of John begins with a prologue describing Jesus in terms derived from Jewish wisdom literature.[4] While wisdom Christology was to be overshadowed by the developing Trinitarian dogma, wherein the divine was defined by using masculine (Father, Son) or gender-neutral (Spirit, τὸ πνεῦμα) terms, in some strands of early Christianity, myths about the divine Wisdom and other mythical female figures remained central.[5]

Alongside Wisdom, other personifications of grammatically feminine nouns abound in ancient literature. Virtue (Arete) was chief among Greek thinking (Xenophon, *Mem.* 2.1.21–34; Philo, *Sacr.* 20–34; Methodius, *Symp.*). In Roman literature, individual virtues such as Dignitas, Pietas, Justitia, and Prudentia, as well as such basic concepts as Philosophia and Natura, often appear personified as women.[6] One Christian representation of Wisdom is Repentance (Metanoia), who is presented as God's daughter and the heavenly

[4] Cf. Gail Corrington Streete, "Women as Sources of Redemption and Knowledge in Early Christian Traditions" in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepherd Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 330–54, on p. 339–40.

[5] Karen L. King, ed. *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* (Phildelphia: Fortress, 1988).

[6] Alex Dressler, *Personification and the Feminine in Roman Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) of all virgins in *Joseph and Aseneth* (15.7–8).[7] Several Nag Hammadi texts also feature a wisdom figure called Barbelo, the female counterpart of the supreme God.[8]

In addition to virtues, however, vices were also often personified as women: Arete was contrasted with Kakia or Hedone (Pleasure), Wisdom with Folly (γυνὴ ἄφρων; Prov 9). Both Greek and Jewish mythology told of how evil came to the world through a primordial woman (Pandora / Eve)—either through her malevolence or her ignorance—which gave cause for several commentators to lament the deceitfulness of the female sex and underline its inferiority (Hesiod, *Op.* 60–105; 1 Tim 2:12–14; Tertullian, *Cult. fem.* 1.1). Early Christian mythmakers even developed complex etiological myths where one of the critical points leading to the creation of the inferior, visible world was a wrong thought, inclination, or action of a female divine character called Wisdom (Sophia). Some versions of this myth describe Wisdom as entangled in harmful emotions (πάθη) and the heavenly Christ as the healer of such emotions.[9] The exemplary human soul (ψυχή) is portrayed as a woman in

[7] Ross Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 61–62; 130–32.

[8] According to Irenaeus, the adherents of the "falsely so-called Gnosis" taught that along with the invisible and incomprehensible perfect Aeon there existed a female Ennoia (Thought), also called Charis (Grace) and Sige (Silence). On different female wisdom figures in the Nag Hammadi texts, see Uwe-Karsten Plisch, "Sophia und ihre Schwestern: Norea, Protennoia, Brontē" in *Antike christliche Apokryphen und Marginalisierte Texte des frühen Christentums.* Bibel und Frauen: Eine exegetisch-kulturgeschichtliche Enzyklopädie 3.2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, forthcoming).

[9] Cf. Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 95–118.

late Antique Christian thought: the soul's fate can resemble that of heavenly wisdom's fate.[10]

Idealized feminine figures also appear in portrayals of wise women of the distant past. Early Christian rhetoric adopted both Jewish and pagan examples of virtuous women, presented as models to be imitated, such as Judith and Esther, Lucretia and Dido.[11] Judith and Esther, who both act as saviors of their people, are depicted as clever, even cunning, but also beautiful. Judith's enemies even marvel at her wisdom, declaring, "No other woman from one end of the earth to the other looks so beautiful or speaks so wisely!" (Jdt 11:20–21). Indeed, in these portrayals, wisdom goes hand in hand with conventional feminine ideals: beauty, purity and piety. In subsequent early Christian tradition, Judith is not primarily remembered and praised for her cunning wisdom in her acts as seductress and liar, but rather for her chastity and godliness (cf. Jerome, *Preface to Judith*).

Such idealized females also include prophetic women, transmitters of divine messages. Although there were no direct counterparts to the powerful interpreters of Greek oracles, Pythia and the Sibyls, some female prophets, such as Deborah and Huldah, do appear in

[10] Ulla Tervahauta, *A Story of the Soul's Journey in the Nag Hammadi Library: A Study of Authentikos Logos (NHC VI,3).* NTOA 107 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); Hugo Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth: Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the Gospel of Philip and the Exegesis of the Soul.* NHMS 73 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

[11] Outi Lehtipuu, "'Receive the Widow Judith, Example of Chastity': The Figure of Judith as a Model Christian in Patristic Interpretations" in *Biblical Women in Patristic Reception / Biblische Frauen in patristischer Rezeption.* Agnethe Siquans, ed. JAJ Supplements (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, forthcoming).

the Hebrew Bible (Judg 4–5; 2 Kgs 22).[12] Luke-Acts portrays Anna (Luke 2:36–38) and the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9) as having the gift of prophecy. It is striking that these women never utter a word in the narrative—it is rather their way of life, i.e. their chastity, that exemplifies their wisdom and that is as important as their prophetic knowledge.[13] Many subsequent writers offer eulogies for female prophets—but only for those who belonged to the past, as their existence did not mean that contemporary female prophets were always accepted.[14] While some nascent branches of Christianity, most notably the "New Prophecy" or Montanism, accepted and even revered female prophetic activity, others opposed it (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 49; *Dialogue between a Montanist and an Orthodox*).[15] Moreover, the reverence of female prophets past and present did not necessarily mean that women's knowledge was otherwise appreciated or that women were allowed to hold positions of authority. While Tertullian, for instance, admires a female prophet as a "sister" with a revelatory gift, able to "converse with angels" (*An.* 9.4), he rejects outright that women might teach, baptize, offer the Eucharist, or perform other such "male functions" (*ullius virilis muneris*; *Virg.* 9.2).

[12] See the special issue of the *Journal of Ancient Judaism*, devoted to female prophecy in Greek and Jewish literature, Hanna Tervanotko, ed. The Image of Female Prophets in Ancient Greek and Jewish Literature. Special Issue of *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 6/3 (2016).

[13] Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (London: T&T Clark, 1994), 164–84.

[14] Similarly, John Chrysostom praises Junia as a female apostle but remains reserved on the topic of women's authority in his own time; see *Hom. Rom.* 30.7.

[15] Joy A. Schroeder, *Deborah's Daughters: Gender Politics and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14–17.

While all best-known ancient philosophers were male, available sources mention several women philosophers. These references have different functions. Some female philosophers are clearly idealized figures of the past (such as Theano, the wife of Pythagoras, or Pericles's companion Aspasia), sometimes serving as indicators of inclusivity; if a woman can philosophize, all men certainly can. All in all, sources provide little information about what women philosophers taught and where such information is available, they are customarily portrayed as teaching other women conventional wisdom of how to be a good wife.[16]

Not all women, however, were married. Ascetic ideals were part of the Christian proclamation from its onset and came into flower by the fourth century. Monastic literature evidences, besides desert fathers, also some desert mothers, such as Amma Syncletica. These desert mothers, like their male counterparts, personified monastic wisdom both in their teaching and in their way of life.[17] Other ascetic women were praised as Christian philosophers and teachers. Most notable among them was Macrina, the sister of Gregory of Nyssa, whom he repeatedly calls "my teacher." However, the narratives of Macrina and other prominent women, such as Olympias or Melanie the Younger, tell frustratingly little about real women—they are instead carefully crafted rhetorical representations that reveal

[16] For some examples, see Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo's "Therapeutae" Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 178–82 (Theano), 182–86 (Aspasia); for conventional models of ideal behavior set to women by Stoics, see ibid. 206–11.

[17] Susanna Elm, *"Virgins of God:" The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 253–82.

more about their authors than about the women they describe.[18] Ironically, the wisdom of these idealized women is only reported by men, and the few glimpses of real women offered in the sources betray a tendency toward grounding ascetic women firmly under the banner of male authority.[19]

On the whole, the relationship between idealized feminine figures and real women is far from straightforward. It is mostly men who paradoxically are knowledgeable about feminine wisdom and other personified virtues, while women's knowledge is expected to profit men, in the manner of the virtuous wife of Proverbs 31. In addition, the paradigmatic wise women of the past not only exemplify knowledge but also more conventional feminine values, such as beauty and fidelity, as Gail Streete aptly summarizes:

> The way of Wisdom leads to life and companionship with God, but she is a companion of males, not the embodiment of females, except as pure virgin daughters, industrious wives, and careful mothers who build up their houses and keep their husbands and sons from straying after sexually independent women. Nor do they stray themselves. The wisdom and knowledge of such women is of the practical and nurturant variety, confined to domestic fidelity.[20]

Controlling Women and Their Knowledge

[18] Elizabeth A. Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the 'Linguistic Turn.'" *JECS* 6 (1998): 413–30.

[19] David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 17–79.

[20] Streete, "Women as Sources of Redemption," 338.

Apart from these idealized figures of myths and other narratives, the dominant perspective of early Christian sources is reserved when it comes to women's knowledge and the authority of women associated with this knowledge. Several texts reflect controversies that centered on women and their proper roles. Polemics against groups deemed heretical took full advantage of dismissive attitudes on women. The author of the Book of Revelation, for example, attacks a female teacher in the congregation of Thyatira, denouncing her as a self-designated prophet: "the woman, Jezebel, who designates herself as a prophet, teaches and leads astray my servants to fornicate and eat meat offered to idols" (Rev 2:20). The Pastoral Epistles, attributed to the apostle Paul, betray similar concerns, seeking to limit women's knowledge. The author of 1 Timothy instructs that women should not teach but instead learn "in silence" (1 Tim 2:10–11), dismisses wrong sorts of teaching as "old wives' tales" (4:7), and is concerned about rambling young widows who talk about "inappropriate things" and are prone to becoming followers of Satan (5:13).[21] Later, Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 180) singles women out as being especially susceptible to the words of those he considered false teachers (*Haer.* 1.13.3–7), a stereotype valorized by Epiphanius of Salamis (late 4th century) in his own time, claiming he had met women who tried to seduce him to heresy and immoral behavior (*Panarion* 26.17.1-9).

In a similar vein, women were already urged to remain silent "in the meetings of the holy" in the notorious passage of 1 Corinthians 14:33–35, according to which it would be "inappropriate" and "shameful" for them to talk in these occasions; should they be eager

[21] On the "improper" talk of women, see Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles*, BZNW 164 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

to learn more, such women should ask their husbands to instruct them in privacy ("at home"). It is nevertheless worth noting that this passage may be a secondary interpolation to 1 Corinthians since the policy it advocates contradicts the instruction Paul offers elsewhere in the same letter on women "praying and prophesying" in public meetings of the Corinthian congregation (1 Cor 11:2–16).[22] In addition, the passage also seems to clash with the high esteem Paul exhibits in his letters toward women whom he calls benefactors (Phoebe; Rom 16:1–2), fellow workers (Prisca and many other women who "work hard" for the Lord; Rom 16:3–5,12), and even apostles (Junia; Rom 16:7).[23] On the other hand, Paul does not reveal any knowledge of women as transmitters of the resurrection proclamation so central in all New Testament gospels (cf. 1 Cor 15:3–8).

The prohibitions for women to teach are often interpreted as indicative of the likelihood that in the congregation addressed in 1 Timothy, there were women who played active roles as teachers and whom the author wanted to silence. Moreover, the strict order not to let young widows go from house to house and the denigration of such widows as gossipers and busybodies (1 Tim 5:13) have been taken to suggest that there were wandering female teachers whose teaching the author opposes. While this may be true, there is no certainty whether ancient texts like 1 Timothy directly reflect certain social realities or whether their statements on women and the knowledge of women should be seen as rhetorical tools "to think with." On the other hand, early Christian congregations were not exclusively male;

[22] See, e.g., Lee A. Johnson, "In Search of the Voice of Women in the Churches: Revisiting the Command to Silence Women in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35" in *Women in the Biblical World: A Survey of Old and New Testament Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth A. McCabe (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 135–54.

[23] On the gender of Junia, see Eldon J. Epp, *Junia*: *The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

women played active roles in the congregations, for example, by hosting their gatherings at their homes (cf. Acts 12:12–17; 16:14–15, 40; Rom 16:3; Col 4:15).[24] It is also likely that women of diverse social statuses also held different positions in their communities and were also privy to various levels of knowledge.

Women and Knowledge in the Gospel Tradition

Similar tensions in the portrayal of female characters exist in the four early Christian gospels that became part of the New Testament. In the Gospel of Mark, women appear both as the only reliable followers of Jesus—who, unlike the male disciples, are present at his crucifixion (Mark 15:40)—and as unreliable messengers, incapable of delivering the news about the empty tomb to the male disciples (Mark 16:8). On the other hand, Jesus's women followers are described as having taken care (διηκόνουν) of him (15:41), the same word used earlier in the gospel to describe how Jesus serves (διακονῆσαι) others as the Son of Man, an act Jesus urges his followers to emulate (Mark 10:41–45). This common terminology in turn places special emphasis to this description of women's activity. In other words, in addition to remaining loyal to Jesus at his final hour, the women at the cross illustrate the ideal discipleship envisaged in Mark. Against this background, the women's failure at the empty tomb seems rather puzzling. In comparison, elsewhere in the Gospel of Mark, people are quick to circulate news about the healings Jesus performed even when he forbids them to do so (Mark 2:40–45; 7:36–41) and especially when he urges them to

[24] Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 157–59; Kaisa-Maria Pihlava, *The Authority of Women Hosts of Early Christian Gatherings in the First and Second Centuries C.E.* (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, forthcoming).

do so (Mark 5:18–20). Thus, the women's failure to spread news about the empty tomb is quite unique in Mark, and the fact that the whole gospel ends with this scene makes their failure even more dramatic. The irony, whether deliberate or accidental, of such a thematic dissonance embedded in this, the original ending of the gospel, is that by remaining silent, the first witnesses to the empty tomb adhere to the ideal of silence women are exhorted to in the Pastoral Epistles.

Other mixed messages on the knowledge of women also emerge from the Gospels of Luke and John. Luke, for instance, expands on Mark's reference to women caring for Jesus by mentioning and even naming "some" women followers of Jesus already in an earlier part of the story (Luke 8:1–3). In fact, Luke affirms that in addition to the three women mentioned by name, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, there were "many other" women, who provided for Jesus with the possessions they had. While the role ascribed to women here is that of rendering service to Jesus, the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42) adds a new twist to this picture. Martha is described in terms that make her similar to the women followers of Jesus mentioned in Luke 8:1–3: she is preoccupied with mundane tasks and laments that her sister Mary has left her "alone" in doing this work. Yet Jesus praises Mary, who has "listened to his words" at his feet and reprimands Martha for "being worried and troubled about many things." The story no doubt illustrates the importance of heeding the words of Jesus (Luke 7:46–49) and lays the foundation for his later advice not to yield to worry (Luke 12:22–31). This much said, it is striking that Luke, on the one hand, features women providing economic support to Jesus, and, on the other, "deconstructs" the idealized picture of such women in the story of Martha and Mary. While

Luke never returns to Mary's privileged knowledge later in the gospel, the claim is made that being the recipient of such knowledge is allowed to women and that receiving knowledge is in fact even more praiseworthy than seeing to the needs of one's guests. At the same time, Mary also embodies the conventional ideals for women: she remains silent and obedient.[25]

In the Gospel of John, women are portrayed in dialogue with Jesus in very much the same manner as men. The strange narrative world of this gospel prevents any quick conclusions about these interlocutors. Martha, for instance, seems to profess unremitting faith in Jesus in John 11:27: "I believe that you are Christ, the Son of God who is coming to the world." Yet, only a few lines later, she expresses doubt. When Jesus asks for the removal of the stone at the tomb of Lazarus, she protests that "there is a stench," since Lazarus has been dead four days. Jesus's response to Martha underlines her lack of faith: "If you believed, you would see the glory of God" (John 11:39–40). The contrary-to-fact condition here indicates that Martha's faith seems less ideal than one might have deduced from John 11:27. This is not a unique feature in the Gospel of John. Jesus responds with a similar warrant to Thomas's confession to "my Lord and my God": "Is it now that you have seen me that you believe? Fortunate are those who believe without having seen" (20:28–29). Jesus's only response to Peter's confession (John 6:68–69), in turn, is the revelatory non sequitur that one of his chosen disciples is a traitor (6:70–71). The Johannine Jesus thus very rarely shows satisfaction with anything other characters in the gospel think or do.[26]

[25] Seim, *Double Message*, 112–18.

[26] One exception is the washing of the feet, where Jesus compliments his disciples for calling him properly their Teacher and Lord (John 13:13).

Nevertheless, women feature prominently in the gospel's dialogues, and the issues addressed in the dialogues with female characters are just as "doctrinal" as those with male characters. Just as the Samaritan woman leads Jesus into a discussion about the right place of worship (4:19–24), Martha is used as a foil to express traditional Jewish beliefs of resurrection, against which Jesus offers a new interpretation of himself being "the resurrection and life" (11:24–25). While women fare no better than men in their discussions with Jesus, there seem to be no reservations as regards the right of women to address such issues. It is also notable that while in the Gospel of Mark the women followers do not bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus, it is Mary of Magdala who performs this task in John. She is both the first to meet the resurrected Jesus and the one who informs the male disciples about the resurrection (John 20:11-18). While women are portrayed as being afraid of the empty tomb in Mark, in John this role is reversed: it is the male disciples who, even after having heard Mary's testimony, are afraid and gather behind closed doors (John 20:19-29).

The Gospel of Mary (possibly from the middle of the second century) builds upon this scene in the Gospel of John. Mary of Magdala comforts and encourages the disciples, who are otherwise struck with fear and unable to proclaim the message about Jesus. Surprisingly, Mary's teaching becomes a subject of debate among the male disciples in this text: Peter is doubtful of whether or not the Savior had really divulged to Mary the privileged information she now imparts to them. It stands to reason, then, that this scene in the Gospel of Mary reflects and assumes a position in early Christian debates about women

as teachers and leaders.[27] Yet it remains unclear how active a role this gospel attributes to women after all. In one of the two extant versions of this text, only one of the disciples, Levi, goes to spread the good news; in another one, it is said that "they" went to preach—but it remains unclear whom "they" refers to: the possibilities are Levi and Mary, Levi and other disciples, or all of them.

Contents of This Book

This brief survey of the topic of women and knowledge has already indicated that knowledge in the context of women and late antiquity can be understood in several different ways and that this knowledge was often subject to debate. Organized in four parts, this book provides a study of the relationship between women and knowledge in early Christian and other ancient sources from a number of perspectives. The first section deals with real women in their social contexts and explores how women's literacy and their role in some emerging Christian cults can be deduced from the available sources. The second part analyzes the *Nachleben* of certain female characters of biblical texts. Stories about paradigmatic figures—both good and evil—were developed over time and employed in inventive ways to create new stories about knowledgeable and crafty, even dangerous women. The third part focuses on ancient intellectual discourses and the role women play in the rhetoric of such discourses. While the attitude towards women and their capabilities is often pejorative, women nevertheless appear at times as visionaries. In addition, femaleness is often used figuratively to denote the human soul. The fourth and final section

[27] Antti Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents*. NHMS 40 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 119–21.

takes to task the topic of feminine wisdom and reflects on female figures in myths related to the Nag Hammadi texts.

In the opening essay, "Women and Independent Religious Specialists in Second-Century Rome," Nicola Denzey Lewis investigates the role of women as religious specialists in groups attacked by heresiologists, such as Irenaeus of Lyons. Denzey Lewis argues that women associated with gnostic teachers, whether fictional or not, are constructed as passive figures, with little power or agency. Even Marcellina who, according to Irenaeus, was a teacher, is depicted mostly through her practices, such as veneration of images, while activities related to her teaching are not described in any detail. Denzey Lewis concludes that in Irenaeus's account, women appear mainly as the objects of male deception. What he tells of such male teachers as Simon Magus and Marcus suggests that they too withheld any real power or prospects for advancement from the women who accompanied them.

Irenaeus's testimonies about Marcellina, a follower of Carpocrates and a second-century Christian teacher (*Haer.* 1.25.6), is also the focus of Gregory Snyder in "'She Destroyed Multitudes': Marcellina's Group in Rome." A detailed textual analysis leads Snyder to suggest that the entire comment about Marcellina and her veneration of images of Greek philosophers is a later addition to the text. This conclusion indicates to Snyder that the information in the passage chiefly pertains to Marcellina, not to Carpocrates. It was in fact Marcellina, not Carpocrates, who used images of philosophers for group rituals; Marcellina thus deserves a more prominent place in the history of Christian iconography than she has generally been granted.

In “Some Remarks on Literate Women from Roman Egypt,” Erja Salmenkivi addresses the issue of female literacy. Our knowledge about women in antiquity rests heavily on literary sources written by upper-class men. Greek papyri, however, evidence women capable of writing letters by themselves. Such evidence sheds light on women and literacy, one of the cornerstones of education. Even in small villages of Roman Egypt, we find literate women who conducted their own businesses and were active in various economic and socio-cultural circles. Salmenkivi discusses several letters written to and by women in the early Christian context of Roman Egypt.

The second part, on the afterlives of female characters of biblical texts, opens with Christian Bull’s investigation, “Women, Angels, and Dangerous Knowledge: The Myth of the Watchers in the Apocryphon of John and its Monastic Manuscript-Context,” of different renderings of the myth of the watchers, based on the Genesis account of angels. These watchers are the sons of God who take women as their wives, beget offspring with them, and teach them illicit arts. Bull discusses the myth in the four known versions of the Apocryphon of John as well as in monastic interpretations in the fourth century Egypt. He suggests that there are considerable differences among the versions in the way they portray women, whether they are seen as innocent victims, seduced by trickery, or as wicked temptresses. Consequently, a monastic reader of the Apocryphon of John might have interpreted the angels as seductive and deceitful demons, dangerous to both ascetic men and women, whereas, in the readings of such monastic writers as Cassian and Annianus,

the sons of God are better understood as paradigmatic male monks and human women a threat that might open the door for demonic desire.

In "Jezebel in Jewish and Christian Traditions," Tuomas Rasimus addresses early Christian and Jewish reception of the notorious ninth-century BCE queen of Israel. He suggests that the literary portrayals of several women of bad repute in early Christian literature have been modeled after the image of Queen Jezebel. In Revelation, John of Patmos calls his prophetic rival in Thyatira by the name of Jezebel, portraying her as a demonic manifestation of the Jezebel of old, sponsoring idolatry and a licentious sexual code. While other early Christian authors did not go as far as to style the women they portrayed as Jezebel, some of them clearly drew upon traditions surrounding this northern queen. Since John the Baptist was considered by some to be Elijah, Jezebel's nemesis, Rasimus argues, Mark reshaped the story of John's death in the hands of Herod to fit Herod and Herodias to the Ahab-Jezebel paradigm. Finally, Irenaeus's report of Simon and Helena (*Haer.* 1.23) depicts Helena as an ex-prostitute from Tyre and stresses Simon's activity in Samaria instead of at Rome. This suggests that Irenaeus, or perhaps already his source, could have modeled Simon's and Helena's biographical sketch partially upon the Ahab-Jezebel paradigm.

Petri Luomanen's essay "Mary and Other Female Characters in the Protevangelium of James" presents a study on the roles assigned to women in the Protevangelium of James. While the focus of the narrative is on Mary, the future mother of Jesus, she, in Luomanen's judgment, ends up being a relatively flat character, assumed without question or further

development to be the (future) Mother of God. The (male) author's theological agenda has thus reduced Mary to a rather passive role. In contrast, the many minor female figures of the narrative—Anna, Juthine, Elizabeth, the midwives, and the undefiled daughters of the Hebrews—actively contribute to the plot of the narrative. Despite the fact that many of their traits corresponded to what was generally expected of women in antiquity, these minor female figures evidence the rounder and deeper approaches to female characterization than those employed to depict the future Mother of God.

In "What Happened to Mary? Women Named Mary in the *Meadow* of John Moschus," Ulla Tervahauta moves beyond apocryphal literature in her analysis of different female characters in John Moschus's *Meadow,* a collection of monastic stories from the late sixth to the early seventh century. These Marys—a mother who murders her children, a prostitute who repents and becomes a nun, and an anchorite who was in a later version of her story to became one of the most famous Marys of Eastern Christianity, Mary of Egypt—show how biblical and other traditions were innovatively rendered as popular stories about women who shared many traits with biblical characters. Tervahauta suggests that since women were outsiders from the male monastic perspective, their portrayals enable not just discussion on how biblical literature is used to tell new stories, but exploration of questions of identity and gender. The women in the stories of the *Meadow* betray their knowledge in their sharp answers and pious wisdom, and even the sinners among them speak for themselves.

The third part of the volume explores how women and the feminine appear in ancient intellectual discourse. In "'For Women Are Not Worthy of Life' Protology and Misogyny in Gospel of Thomas Saying 114," Ivan Miroshnikov discusses the puzzling saying that ends the Gospel of Thomas, according to which women are not worthy of life and must instead become "living spirits," i.e. male, to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Miroshnikov argues that the Thomasine notion of a "living spirit" was inspired by the creation narrative of Genesis 2:7 and that saying 114 describes this living spirit as male because the first human of Genesis 2:7 was male. Approaching saying 114 against this background in the second creation account allows a new insight into the harsh words of Simon Peter: women are not worthy of life because the first living being was male. Fortunately, according to Jesus, a woman can still attain the condition of the primordial man, i.e. transform into a "living spirit," and, by doing so, attain salvation.

Silke Petersen's point of departure in "'Women and Heresy in Patristic Discourses and Modern Studies" is the observation that one popular litmus test for the contemporary value of a religion is the attitude that religion exhibits toward women. The "woman question" is used as a tool of praising one's own religion and of denigrating others—both in the present and in the past. While early Christian heresiologists frequently linked women and their active role in heresy, Petersen demonstrates that the stereotype of the heretical woman only appears in the fourth century. In earlier sources, the stereotype connected with women is that of the seduced victim. In historical terms, she claims, the number of women in so-called heretical movements was not large, especially as there is no basis for assuming that female office-holders who appear in inscriptions were automatically members of a heretical

movement. Petersen concludes that both "woman" and "heresy" are constructed Others whose very existence reinforces the Own, characterized by the terms "man" and "orthodoxy."

Women also play a prominent role in the *Symposium* of Methodius of Olympus (later third century CE), which depicts a banquet of ten virgins who give encomia in turn in praise of chastity and other virtues. The work is generally regarded as having little to do with Plato's dialogue of the same name, which is a decidedly all-male, bawdy affair. The climax of Methodius's treatise is the speech of Thecla, an invective against astrological determinism, extolling the virtues of free will in Christian life. Commentators suppose Methodius here to be attacking gnostic doctrines regarding the relationship between humans, the stars, and Providence. In "Astrological Determinism, Free Will, and Desire According to Thecla (St. Methodius, *Symposium* 8.15–16)," Dylan M. Burns shows that Methodius almost certainly does not have Gnosticism in mind, for the sort of astrological determinism Thecla argues against has no parallel in extant gnostic sources. Rather, "her" polemic is directed against the second-century Syrian Christian philosopher Bardaisan. Thecla's description of the relationship between free will, desire, and the soul's experience of emptiness, on the other hand, demonstrates that Methodius was reading Plato more closely than his modern editors have supposed, for the language she uses closely echoes that of Plato, making Thecla a mouthpiece of philosophical knowledge.

Hugo Lundhaug rejects Gnosticism as a meaningful category when studying Nag Hammadi texts in relation to early Egyptian monasticism. In "Monastic Exegesis and the Female Soul

in the Exegesis on the Soul," Lundhaug claims that instead of postulating that the Nag Hammadi codices represent Gnosticism and seeking to identify so-called gnostic traits in Pachomian literature, possible connections should be sought out by focusing on other common aspects. A test case for such an investigation is the Exegesis on the Soul, a Nag Hammadi treatise whose eponymous main character, the soul, is described throughout the text as a woman. Lundhaug suggests that the closest parallels to the way this text speaks about the soul and prostitution are found in other monastic texts. By carefully considering the main interests of the Exegesis on the Soul—repentance, prayer, and the soul's ideal attachment to Christ—numerous points of contact can be found between the way the scriptures are used in the Exegesis on the Soul and in literature associated with the Pachomian and Shenoutean monastic federations.

In the fourth and final part of this volume, the focus is turned to the feminine principle in myth and philosophy. In "Life, Knowledge and Language in Classic Gnostic Literature: Reconsidering the Role of the Female Spiritual Principle and Epinoia," Tilde Bak Halvgaard examines the female spiritual principle in the Hypostasis of the Archons (NHC II 4) and related texts where she is styled with such names as Sophia, Epinoia (Thought), Pronoia (Forethought), and Zoe (Life). Bak Halvgaard notes that the pattern of female figures, whether divine or human, who represent, possess, or provide knowledge, is widely known in ancient literature. In Nag Hammadi texts in particular, the female spiritual principle mostly appears in retellings of the Genesis story and is closely related to the figure of Eve. The different female figures in these stories and the topos of eating from the tree of knowledge are both presented in a positive light. However, the creative and life-giving

acts of these figures are not framed as profound acts of creation but simply biological processes. Moreover, such motifs as the pursuit of Eve/the female spiritual principle in the Hypostasis of the Archons and the recurring motif of searching and finding in Thunder: Perfect Mind not only illustrate wisdom as something desired by men but also rehearse a stereotypical image of what women are to men. Nevertheless, it is still the female spiritual principle that functions as a mediator between the human world and the divine sphere, providing a path for human beings to approach the Father.

In the next essay, "'Wisdom, Our Innocent Sister': Reflections on a Mytheme," Michael A. Williams reflects upon the motif of Wisdom's innocence as it is attested in the origin stories found among Nag Hammadi and related writings. Scholars have often called Wisdom's action in the myth narrated by Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.29) and in related passages of the Apocryphon of John a "mistake," "tragedy," "fall," etc. Yet, as Williams notes, what is often overlooked is that in Irenaeus, Wisdom's motivations are free of any suggestion of evil. In fact, evil does not appear until *after* the creation of the material cosmos. Similarly, the myth narrated in the Apocryphon of John can be read as a distinctive affirmation of the tradition of creation by God's Wisdom. Wisdom in the Apocryphon of John is impetuous but innocent: the blame falls rather on the activities of her son, not so much in his original creation of the cosmos as in his arrogant and ignorant efforts to tyrannize humanity. Williams proceeds then to discuss the Trimorphic Protennoia and the Second Treatise of the Great Seth, where he notes that in these texts Wisdom has no connection with evil at all. It is only in the Pistis Sophia that the innocence motif has been turned to the service of

fundamentally demoting Wisdom ontologically, which could have been part of a polemical program to trump "Sethian" mythology.

The concluding essay is John D. Turner's "The Virgin That Became Male: Feminine Principles in Platonic and Gnostic Texts." Turner explores feminine principles in the metaphysics of select Platonic and gnostic literature, arguing that the Sethian Father-Mother-Son triad was derived from the Father-Mother-Child triad of Plato's *Timaeus*, either directly or in the form of summaries and references to it in first- and early second-century Platonic sources. However, beginning with the Sethian Platonizing treatises, such as Allogenes and Zostrianos, the Father-Mother-Son nomenclature begins to fade, and the ontological position of the Mother begins to decline. According to Turner, this development can be explained by the increasing Sethian preoccupation with the metaphysics of contemporary Platonism.

Antti Marjanen on Knowledge (Gnosis) and Women

These essays demonstrate how much the work of Antti Marjanen has inspired each of the contributors of this book. Antti's comprehensive study on early Christian traditions about Mary of Magdala deals with texts spanning from the second to the fourth century, from the Gospel of Thomas to the Manichean Psalm-Book.[28] One of the most important points he makes is the tension that often exists in these texts between idealized women (such as Mary

[28] Antti Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*; cf. Antti Marjanen, "Mary Magdalene, a Beloved Disciple" in *Mariam, the Magdalen, and the Mother*, ed. Deirdre J. Good (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

Magdalene) and low opinions about women or femininity in general. For one, Marjanen points out that potential women readers of the Dialogue of the Savior would have been

> exposed to a mixed message. On the one hand, they heard about Mary Magdalene, a prominent woman, who together with her two male colleagues played the most important part in a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples while he was imparting his most valuable teachings. On the other hand, while describing such behavior a Christian may not take part in, the text used metaphorical language which clearly and in an unqualified way devalued women.[29]

This observation very much characterizes Antti's scholarly style. He has sought to avoid one-sided, sometimes idealized portraits of alternative early Christianities in which women's rights might have been better acknowledged than in the "winning side" of the Christian church. What he has offered, instead, is a more versatile picture of how women were treated in documents stemming from forgotten forms of Christianity. What makes the views expounded in these texts exciting is the very tension between the way they extol women characters and the way they dismiss "ordinary" women. Antti's study first and foremost warns against any simple correlation between the positive role of some women in the story world of these texts and the role of real women in communities behind these texts.

[29] Marjanen, *Woman Jesus Loved*, 92.

Antti's career as a researcher and teacher at the University of Helsinki has spanned almost 35 years. He has educated entire generations of biblical scholars, including the four editors of this volume. Antti has been the pioneer who broached the study of Coptic and Nag Hammadi texts in Finland. His numerous courses on Coptic in Helsinki and the scholarly networks he has built with his Nordic colleagues have produced a constant stream of younger scholars specialillzed in this field. In addition to his studies on Mary of Magdala, Antti is especially known for his articles on other early Christian women and movements,[30]

[30] Antti Marjanen, "Women Disciples in the *Gospel of Thomas*" in *Thomas at the Crossroads: Essays on the Gospel of Thomas*, ed. Risto Uro (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 89–106; Antti Marjanen, "Phoebe, a Letter Courier" in *Lux humana, Lux aeterna* (Helsinki & Göttingen: Finnish Exegetical Society and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005); Antti Marjanen, "Male Women Martyrs: The Function of Gender-transformation Language in Early Christian Martyrdom Accounts" in *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body, and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity*, ed. T. K. Seim and J. Økland (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009); Antti Marjanen, "Rewritten Eve Traditions in the Apocryphon of John" in *Bodies, Borders, Believers: Ancient Texts and Present Conversations: Essays in Honor of Turid Karlsen Seim on Her 70th Birthday*, ed. A. Hege Grung, M. Bjelland Kartzow and A. R. Solevåg (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 57–67.

most prominently Gnosticism,[31] but also Montanism.[32] In Finland, he has always been the foremost specialist on the Nag Hammadi Library and apocryphal gospels.

Those familiar with Antti personally have also learned to appreciate his amiable character and the time and devotion he takes to read and comment on the texts of students and colleagues. In addition to being a great and highly knowledgeable colleague, he has also been a good friend to us all. This book has its origin in the aura of friendship which Antti has created among those near him and should first and foremost be understood as our token celebrating that friendship, for which we are immensely grateful to him.

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[31] An important contribution in the field is Antti Marjanen, ed. *Was There a Gnostic Religion?* PFES 87 (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2005). Cf. his numerous publications on Nag Hammadi and related texts, e.g., "The Figure of Authades in the Nag Hammadi and Related Documents" in *Coptica – Gnostica – Manichaica,* ed. L. Painchaud and P.-H. Poirier (Quebec: Les presses de l'Université Laval, 2006), 567–81; "The Figure of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas" in *Thomasine Traditions in Antiquity,* ed. J. M. Asgeirsson, A. D. DeConick and R. Uro. NHMS 59 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 209–19; "Does the Gospel of Judas Rehabilitate Judas Iscariot?" in *Gelitten – Gestorben – Auferstanden: Passions- und Ostertraditionen im antiken Christentum,* ed. T. Nicklas, A. Merkt. and J. Verheyden, WUNT 2/273 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2010), 209–24; "Sethian Books of the Nag Hammadi Library as Secret Books" in *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices: Studies for Einar Thomassen at Sixty,* ed. C. H. Bull, L. I. Lied and J. D. Turner. NHMS 76 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 87–106; "A Salvific Act of Transformation or a Symbol of Defilement? Baptism in Valentinian Liturgical Readings (NHC XI,2) and the Testimony of Truth (NHC IX,3)" in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World: Essays in Honour of John D. Turner,* ed. K. Corrigan and T. Rasimus. NHMS 82 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 245–59.

[32] Marjanen "Montanism and the Formation of the New Testament Canon" in *The Formation of the Early Church,* ed. Jostein Ådna. WUNT 2/183. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 239–63; Antti Marjanen, "Montanism: Egalitarian Ecstatic 'New Prophecy'" in *A Companion to Second-century Christian "Heretics",* ed. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 185–212; Antti Marjanen, "Female Prophets among Montanists" in *Prophets Male and Female: Gender and Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Eastern Near East,* ed. Jonathan Stökl and Corrine L. Carvalho (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 127–43.